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A startling increase in heroin use in the suburbs, particularly among teens, is drawing the attention of federal officials as well as local and state law enforcement agencies.

LAKE COUNTY

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-10th, of Highland Park discussed plans Friday to visit Afghanistan and the Netherlands to support drug eradication efforts in these countries.

During a press conference with county and state drug enforcement officials at Kirk's office, the congressman said efforts to curtail heroin from those countries is critical to the war on drugs here at home.

"We see the world's largest crop of heroin grown in Afghanistan and that crop is now at a record level," said Kirk. "If we do not succeed, we will see a large wave of new, more pure heroin coming into the United States."

Officials report an increase in heroin-related emergency room visits and deaths in Chicago suburbs in the last three years.

"It's a definite problem. It's a big problem in Lake County," said Mark Rasmussen, director of the Lake County Metropolitan Enforcement Group, who attended the press conference along with Illinois State Police Chief Drug Coordinator Terry Lemming.

Lemming said the number of heroin deaths increased from seven to 10 between 2002 and 2003. Figures aren't in yet for 2004, but Lemming said seven heroin-related deaths were reported in the county in the first quarter of that year alone.

Lemming said heroin use is a greater problem among more affluent, suburban teens who can afford it.

"I think it's a much bigger problem out in the suburbs," he said.

Disturbing trend

Local officials and school counselors say they have noticed a disturbing pattern in heroin use, but say it's difficult to gauge how widespread.

Lake County Coroner Richard Keller said the number of people who died who tested positive for heroin last year increased.

"We've certainly seen an increase in the number of deaths directly attributable to drugs, a 29 percent increase in 2004 over 2003," he said.

Keller said there were 49 total drug-related deaths in Lake County in 2004, compared to 38 in 2003.

Joanna Bowersmith, a former heroin addict who works as a counselor to those addicted to heroin, and Kate Patton, an anti-drug advocate, whose daughter, Kelley, died of an Ecstasy overdose, also spoke at last week's press conference on the dangers of drug use.

Bowersmith, now 23, of Oak Park, said she became addicted to heroin in high school and didn't quit until she was arrested at the age of 17.

"It was so easy to get when kids were looking for it," said Bowersmith. "It was much easier to get heroin than alcohol."

Patton will never forget the day when the Rolling Meadows police came to her door to inform her that her daughter had died of an Ecstasy overdose.

"She just graduated from college. She was a beautiful girl. Her life, unfortunately was cut all too short by the use of drugs," Patton said.

She advises parents to talk to their children and be aware of the warning signs of drug abuse and addiction.

On the positive side, Lemming said overall drug use among teens nationwide is down and the use of club drugs, while still a problem, appears to have declined the last two years.

Drug profits

Kirk's mission to Afghanistan comes as the United States prepares to launch a \$700 million heroin eradication program in that country, in concert with the new government there.

Kirk said heroin is not only a threat to the nation's youth but also profits from the heroin trade are helping finance terrorists like Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida. Drug profits from heroin in Afghanistan are expected to rise from \$2.5 billion last year to \$7 billion this year, he said.

"At some point, terrorists might be in the market for nuclear weapons with that kind of money," he said. "There's a well worn path connecting the drug trade and terrorism so it's a vital concern to our national security."